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AUTHOR Ladwig, Dennis J.
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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of the development of quality/performance circles at Lakeshore Technical Institute (LTI), Wisconsin, and of the projects undertaken through the quality/performance circle program during its 3-year history. First, background information is provided on the use of quality circles in Japan and the United States, including information on required elements for successful quality circles, the benefits that may be accrued through such efforts, and the characteristics of LTI. After highlighting the reasons for initiating the quality circle program at LTI, the paper outlines the procedures used to implement the program: (1) board approval; (2) collegewide invitation to participate in an orientation to the quality/performance circle system; (3) literature review; (4) surveys regarding decision-making and problem-solving processes at LTI conducted before and after the implementation of the quality/performance circle program; (5) assessment of the management style of LTI personnel; (6) survey regarding the impact of the quality/performance circle program; and (7) personnel selection according to work classification. Major conclusions regarding the program after its first year of implementation are presented, followed by a listing of the 16 goals and projects addressed by the program (e.g., the development of an idea/suggestion memo system, a recognition and retirement program, and a wellness program for staff members). Finally, conclusions stressing the positive results of the quality/performance circle program at LTI are presented. (AYC)

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QUALITY/PERFORMANCE CIRCLES
THREE YEARS AFTER
IMPLEMENTATION

DENNIS J. LADWIG

A PAPER PRESENTED TO NOVA UNIVERSITY FOR PRESENTATION
AT THE EIGHTH ANNUAL PRACTITIONERS' HALL OF FAME

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Background and Significance

Recently, it has become fashionable to compare supposedly effective Japanese management with supposedly ineffective American management. One of the most commonly cited reasons for the apparent Japanese superiority is the extensive application of participative management techniques, one of which is the Quality Circles technique utilized in many Japanese organizations.

In recent years, U.S. management has begun an attempt to increase worker involvement and participation in the decision-making and problem-solving processes. It is believed that increases in employee motivation and commitment to organizational goals can be achieved when you meaningfully involve employees in the planning and decision making regarding problems that affect their work.

The Quality Circles process, successfully employed in Japanese industry within recent years, can be described as a process involving small groups of employees working together and meeting regularly to discuss such critical matters as: (1) more effective ways of carrying out their job assignments, (2) ways to improve their professional performance, and (3) factors enhancing the quality of their work life. A Quality Circle meets voluntarily on a regularly scheduled basis; receives training on problem-solving techniques, group decision-making

processes, data gathering and presenting proposals; and implements corrective actions within the authority under their control. Ideally, members of a particular Quality Circle should be from the same work area or do similar work so that the problems they select will be familiar to all of them. Implementing a successful Quality Circle requires the following elements:

1. Organizational recognition and utilization of its personnel (employees).

2. Organizational support of its personnel in both personal and professional achievement.

3. Organizational commitment over the long term to improve performance in all facets of the organization.

Related literature sources have indicated that the term Quality Circle is synonymous with a number of terms used to denote employee participation in decision making, problem solving, and/or problem analysis. Ford Motor Company has introduced an Employee Involvement (EI) program. Hughes Aircraft Company has a program entitled Hughes Circles. Kohler Company has developed an Employee Problem Solving (EPS) program. Measurable Performance Systems, a Milwaukee, Wisconsin, based management consulting firm, has developed Performance Circles (PC), an American alternative to Quality Circles.

A summary of related literature indicates the following benefits of a Quality/Performance Circles system may be accrued to an organization:

1. Inspires more efficient teamwork and open communication.
2. Increases employee motivation.
3. Creates employee problem-solving capability.
4. Builds positive employee attitudes toward problem prevention.
5. Promotes personal leadership development.
6. Develops harmonious manager/worker relationships.
7. Develops greater safety awareness.
8. Promotes cost reduction.
9. Capitalizes on an organization's most valuable asset--its people.
10. Ensures an organization of both today's and yesterday's investment in their personnel.
11. Enables employees to recycle their education, experience, and knowledge.
12. Combines some old-fashioned business principles with modern state-of-the-art technology.
13. Integrates easily with other management models (MBO, etc.).
14. Develops a motivational atmosphere for quality performance.

Lakeshore Technical Institute (LTI), one of Wisconsin's 16 vocational, technical, and adult education districts (VTAE), is a vocational-technical institute offering a flexible and varied educational program and related services to the citizens and taxpayers of the two-county school district and the state of Wisconsin. LTI grants associate degrees, vocational diplomas, and certificates and also offers a variety of individual adult and continuing education courses. LTI has enrolled over 2,300 full-time equivalent students (unduplicated headcount of 28,000) and employed 277 full-time equivalent employees (unduplicated headcount of 929) during the past three years.

Reason For Implementation

Throughout the 1970s as enrollments increased and educational programs and services continued to expand, communications relating to decision making and problem solving within LTI

became more difficult. During this same period, LTI staff members also expressed a desire for greater participation in the institution's decision-making and problem-solving processes and an interest in developing a greater participative management style within LTI.

To promote greater participative opportunities for the staff, the LTI Board of Education requested that research be conducted on a Quality/Performance Circle system. Dennis Ladwig, LTI assistant director and a student enrolled in Nova University's Doctor of Education program, accepted the responsibility to conduct an applied institutional research project on the implementation and effectiveness of a Quality/Performance Circle system model process as partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree at Nova University.

LTI chose to call its participative managment technique Quality/Performance Circles because of involvement of both management and nonmanagement personnel. Recognizing that the Quality/Performance Circles process is just one aspect of a participative management technique, it was the recommendation of the LTI administrative staff that movement toward an employee participative process (Quality/Performance Circles) would be a long-range effort moving in the direction of including more participative management.

Procedures For Implementation

All management and nonmanagement staff of LTI were informed of the intent to implement a Quality/Performance Circles process

model during the 1982-83 school year. The total full-time employees of LTI at the time of implementation was 45 management and 240 nonmanagement staff. Of the 45 management staff, 39 volunteered to participate. Reasons for six management non-participants were: (1) conflict with their work schedules, and (2) some management staff did not feel comfortable with Quality/Performance Circles and wanted to measure the impact of the process at a later date. The nonmanagement staff (faculty and support services staff) were allotted a limited number of openings to participate in the study. The reasons were: (1) limited resources available for training, (2) the intent to involve as many management staff as possible in the training and participation in the Quality/Performance Circles process during the first year of implementation, and (3) lack of trained LTI Quality/Performance Circles facilitators. Of the 240 nonmanagement staff, 20 openings were available for Quality/Performance Circles training; and ten faculty and nine support staff of designated divisions volunteered and were invited to participate.

In order to implement and evaluate a Quality/Performance Circles system model within the Lakeshore Technical Institute, the following procedures were utilized:

1. The Lakeshore Technical Institute Board of Education was requested to approve the implementation of the Quality/-Performance Circles process as a decision-making and problem-solving model for the 1982-83 school year.

2. All personnel of the Lakeshore Technical Institute were invited to attend a Steering Committee meeting in which an outside consultant covered the history, facts, theory, and realities of the Quality/Performance Circles system. The outside consultant, president of Measurable Performance Systems, had extensive experience in training of business, government, and industrial employees on the Quality/Performance Circles management model.

3. A review of related literature was performed. While there is a wealth of information (some textbooks and a greater number of periodicals) on the Quality/Performance Circles management model, the review of current literature revealed very few studies completed on Quality/Performance Circles effectiveness and evaluation.

4. A pretest attitude questionnaire was administered before the initiation of the implementation phase of the Quality/Performance Circles process (August 1982) to measure the initial participant attitudes pertaining to the decision-making and problem-solving processes within the Lakeshore Technical Institute. This questionnaire involved the use of a numerical Likert-type scale of one to five with five indicating great agreement.

5. A posttest attitude questionnaire administered during the fourth quarter of the Quality/Performance Circles process (April 1983). This questionnaire was identical to the attitude questionnaire administered at the start of the implementation of the Quality/Performance Circles process.

6. A management-style inventory was administered at the beginning of the implementation stage of the Quality/Performance Circles system model to determine the management style of LTI personnel involved.

7. A posttest questionnaire to measure the implementation of the Quality/Performance Circles process model was administered during the fourth quarter (April 1983). This questionnaire was designed to measure and obtain data and information regarding the training, acceptance, support, and impact of the Quality/Performance Circles process.

8. LTI personnel participation selection in the Quality/-Performance Circles process was according to work classification. Seven individual Quality/Performance Circles were developed with 58 Lakeshore Technical Institute management and nonmanagement personnel participating in the training and subsequent process.

Major Conclusions Reached After One Year of Implementation

Lakeshore Technical Institute management and nonmanagement staff who participated during the first year of the Quality/-Performance Circles process had a more positive attitude toward the institutional decision-making and problem-solving process as a result of involvement in the participative management techniques.

Staff involvement in the Quality/Performance Circles process is believed to have resulted in improvement of communication, employee attitudes, instruction and support services, and quality of working life. In addition, the participants indi-

cated their preference to change from a traditional Quality Circles concept of meeting once each week on a yearly basis to change to a project circle concept. A project circle would meet on a weekly basis for one hour, but would function only for a specified period of time that it would take to complete the specific project/problem or concern.

The impact of the Quality/Performance Circle program has been significant on the decision-making/problem-solving process within the Lakeshore Technical Institute. LTI is now entering its third year of the Quality/Performance Circle program. Evaluation has shown that the first two years of the circles program provided the institution with many valuable learning experiences, laid a foundation for a strong future, and indicated to the LTI staff that there is a place and a definite need for Quality/Performance Circle-type activities within the Lakeshore Technical Institute.

Summary of Quality/Performance Goals/Projects

During the three-year period that the quality/performance circles program has been operating within LTI, the following various goals and projects were completed:

1. An idea/suggestion memo system was developed for LTI personnel who desired an answer to a question, wished to communicate information, or requested information.

2. A recognition and retirement program was developed for full-time staff. Guidelines were established for retirement and recognition for years of service.

3. A program was developed which advertised LTI adult and continuing education offerings in printed articles in business, industrial, and service organizations within the LTI district.

4. An interview instrument was developed for evaluating existing support services.

5. A recognition program was developed entitled "Who's Who/What's What" and incorporated into the weekly Announcements. Staff, forms, and/or activities from each support service area were highlighted to promote awareness of the support services.

6. An informational system was developed on how the computer can assist the LTI faculty in record keeping, word processing, and grading procedures.

7. A survey instrument was developed to obtain information on personal computers owned by LTI staff, related equipment, and software.

8. An improved procedure and system was developed pertaining to paying other earnings for the Adult and Continuing Education program which resulted in the reduction of paper work.

9. A plan of action was developed for the Child Care Center on the LTI campus which implemented a long-term cost-effective plan for operation of the LTI Child Care Center in order to operate on a profit basis.

10. An institutional training circle was initiated which reviewed existing institutional training policies/procedures and prepared a reference document to be utilized as a guide for further development of institutional training guidelines.

11. A procedures manual was developed which established guidelines for submission of regular and special word processing projects.

12. A quality circle was developed which developed guidelines for better utilization and maintenance of the Lakeshore Technical Institute fleet cars.

13. A Well, Well, Well Circle was formed for the purpose of developing a wellness program for the staff members of the Lakeshore Technical Institute. The wellness program initiated in the fall of 1984 has implemented numerous activities pertaining to wellness education and other related information to improve the overall wellness of the LTI staff.

14. A positive thinking circle was formed to encourage positive thinking and optimism within the LTI staff.

15. A project circle was developed which identified the types of projects being typed within the institution and made recommendations as to where (centralized word processing or decentralized word processing) these projects can most efficiently be completed.

16. A quality circle was developed for the purpose of redesigning the student evaluation form(s).

Educational institutions similar to LTI have begun using methods in an attempt to address productivity and quality. To address productivity and quality issues, efforts have to be made to focus staff energies on methods and techniques that will enable them to better utilize their abilities, experiences, and talents. Implementing participative management techniques such

as those used in quality circles enables an institution to utilize their employees' expertise through increased involvement in decision-making and problem-solving processes.

Quality/Performance Circles can be a vehicle for enhancing the quality of work life by increasing the opportunities for staff members to participate in the decision-making and problem-solving processes. Within the Lakeshore Technical Institute, a philosophy regarding participation has been developed; and encouragement is given to all LTI staff members to participate within the Quality/Performance Circles program. The LTI educational administrators and managers encourage participation of all staff employees. Quality/Performance Circles have resulted in improved staff member attitudes and a willingness to participate in the institutional decision-making and problem-solving processes.

Conclusion

The Quality Circles concept has been credited with being a key component in increasing employee productivity. This participative management technique has been used in banks, hospitals, industrial and service organizations.

At the Lakeshore Technical Institute, the circles' program has resulted in increased group involvement, personal satisfaction, new techniques to utilize in our classes, a feeling of accomplishment and pride in a job well done, and group recognition. The members of the LTI Board of Education and administration strongly support the quality/performance circles program and have expressed their gratitude to all of the staff members

who have participated in the circles program during the past three years.

The continued success of this program depends upon the concern and involvement of all the LTI staff--faculty, management, and support services. LTI looks forward to having increased participation by all interested staff members in the years ahead.

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